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Top Secret

25X1

June 3, 1975

25X1

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National Intelligence Bulletin

June 3, 1975

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|---|
| ISRAEL-EGYPT: Israeli troop withdrawal primarily a political gesture | 1 |
| PORTUGAL: Azorean coup rumors continue | 3 |
| CAMBODIA: Khmer communist conference convenes Thursday | 5 |

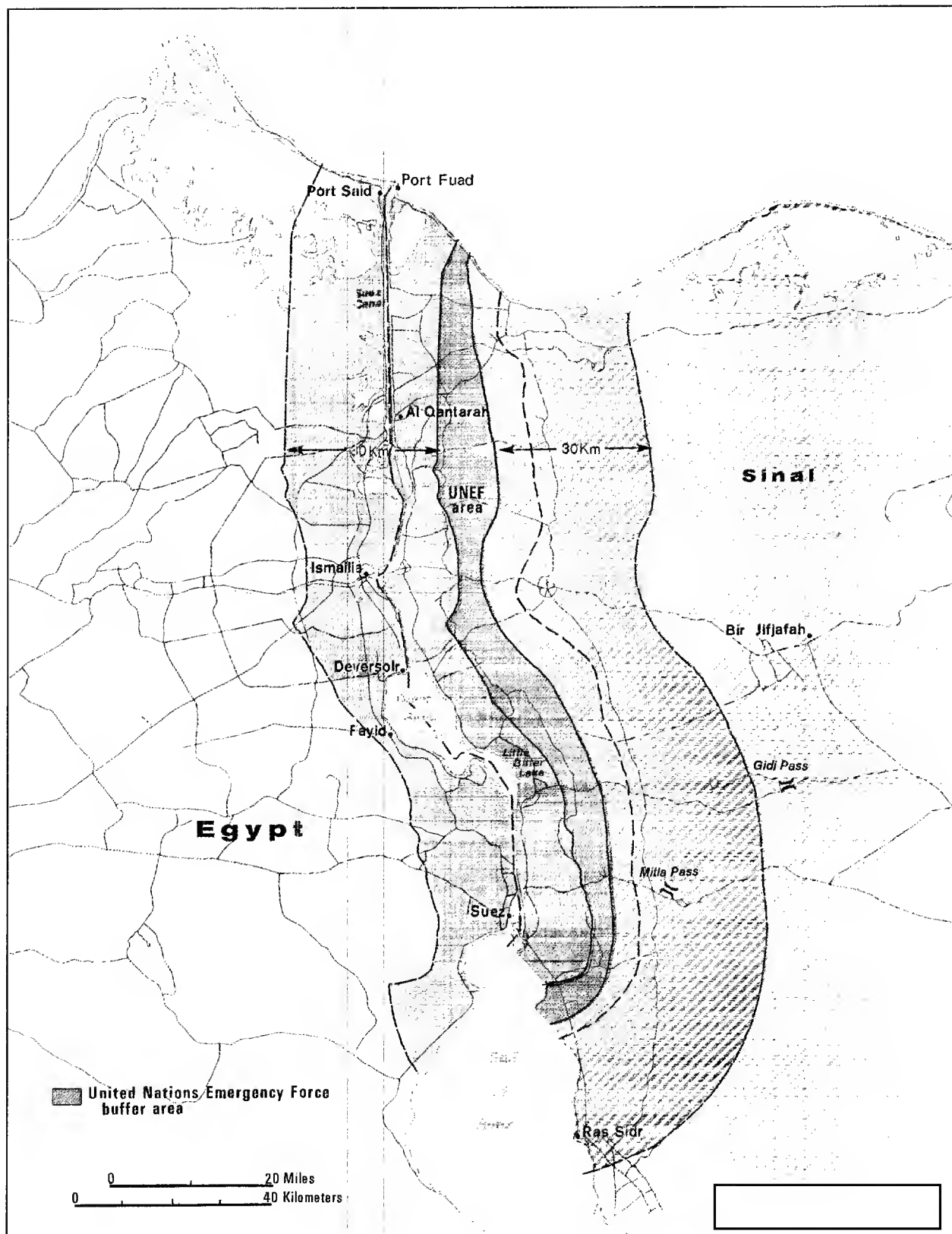
25X1



| | |
|---|----|
| RHODESIA: Rival nationalist factions clash | 11 |
|---|----|

25X1





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National Intelligence Bulletin

June 3, 1975

ISRAEL-EGYPT

Prime Minister Rabin announced yesterday that Israel would unilaterally reduce the size of its forces stationed in the forward portion of the front with Egypt. The pullback is primarily a political gesture and is not likely to produce a militarily significant troop reduction in the area.

Rabin said the action was being taken in hopes of reducing military tensions with Egypt and was not a replacement for the current Israeli-Egyptian disengagement agreement.

Initial Egyptian reaction to the Israeli move has been highly favorable. Terming the action a step in the right direction, an Egyptian spokesman with President Sadat in Salzburg said that Sadat would look favorably on Israeli "use" of the canal if his military commanders conclude that the thinning out is "serious and not propagandistic."

The spokesman did not explain whether "use" would entail the transit of Israeli flag vessels or only of Israeli cargoes on ships flying other flags. The reference is in any case the first public Egyptian acknowledgment that Israel might be allowed access to the canal in any way.

Rabin told a press conference Israel will reduce by half the number of tanks currently within 30 kilometers of the Suez Canal. The Israelis also will maintain no artillery within 32 kilometers of the canal, and will position no missiles—except anti-tank missiles—within 40 kilometers of the UN buffer zone. Israeli troop strength in the "thinned-out area"—presumably the 20-kilometer limited-armaments area—is to be cut to one-half the level permitted by the current disengagement agreement.

Under the disengagement agreement, Israel and Egypt can have no more than 30 tanks, 36 field artillery pieces, and 7,000 troops each in their respective limited-armaments area. There are no restrictions on the size of forces that can be stationed beyond the limited area. No surface-to-air missiles, however, can be stationed within 30 kilometers of the UN buffer zone.

25X1

National Intelligence Bulletin

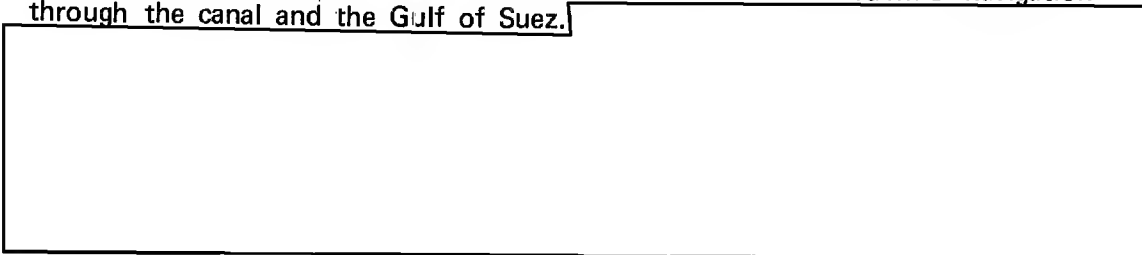
June 3, 1975

25X1



The suspicion is also strong in Israel that President Sadat might try to exploit the canal reopening to reinforce Egyptian troop strength on the east bank in violation of the disengagement agreement. Rabin may hope that Israel's decision to reduce its troop strength near the canal will block such an Egyptian attempt by undercutting its most likely rationale—that Cairo was doing so solely to protect international shipping in the canal. When he announced the decision yesterday Rabin pointedly stated that Israeli forces in Sinai will honor freedom of navigation through the canal and the Gulf of Suez.

25X1



25X1



National Intelligence Bulletin

June 3, 1975

PORTUGAL

The Portuguese government yesterday was apparently not making preparations to counter a move by Azorean separatists, although rumors continue to circulate in Lisbon that the separatists may make a unilateral declaration of independence.

An aide to President Costa Gomes has admitted to US embassy officials that Portugal has serious problems in the Azores which must be solved. He stressed, however, that these problems require a political rather than a military solution. The aide was not aware of any mainland security forces being dispatched to the islands, and observers in Lisbon have not noticed any unusual military activity, although a number of trucks and jeeps reportedly were unloaded in Ponta Delgada within the last two weeks.

25X1

Meanwhile, in Lisbon the multiparty constituent assembly elected on April 25 held its first meeting yesterday. President Costa Gomes opened the assembly with what appeared to be a warning against replaying the political disputes that have disrupted the government when he called on the deputies to subordinate party interests to the greater national interest.

National Intelligence Bulletin

June 3, 1975

The assembly will draw up a new constitution within strict guidelines dictated by the military and already agreed to by the parties. In addition, it is expected to set dates for elections to both municipal councils and a national parliament.

Although the Armed Forces Movement is likely to monitor its deliberations very closely, the assembly, which is dominated by the moderate Socialist and Popular Democratic parties, could provide an effective forum for political moderates in the next few months.

The proceedings of the assembly may not receive the press coverage moderates would like, however, since most leading political figures will be absent. Political party leaders in the coalition government, including Socialist leader Soares and Communist chief Cunhal, resigned their assembly seats in order to retain their cabinet posts.

25X1

National Intelligence Bulletin

June 3, 1975

CAMBODIA

The major conference of Khmer Communist Party officials that convenes in Phnom Penh on Thursday will probably mark the end of the initial period of domestic consolidation. The leadership can be expected to outline its long-term policies and goals and to obtain rubber-stamp approval from the party rank and file.

The occasion may also be used for a public unveiling of the new administration and possibly for further pronouncements concerning Prince Sihanouk's future.

The covert party apparatus has been functioning as a shadow government—a role it will undoubtedly continue to play after a government is formally installed.

Khmer communist propaganda no doubt has exaggerated the progress being made in restoring production,

25X1

National Intelligence Bulletin

The party leadership and its relatively small pool of trained cadre have had their hands full carrying out the massive changes that have been decreed for society and trying to cope with the problems that have resulted. This probably explains in part the delay in installing a national administration.

The US embassy in Bangkok has suggested that a power struggle may have paralyzed the leadership. A Cambodian spokesman in Peking—presumably a member of Sihanouk's entourage—has denied a Thai newspaper's report that Deputy Prime Minister Khieu Samphan was killed in a factional shoot-out in Phnom Penh earlier this month. [REDACTED]

25X1

[REDACTED] neither Khieu Samphan nor Information Minister Hu Nim—the only two leaders who have been mentioned publicly since the communist take-over—has issued a statement in over two weeks. If a power struggle is under way, any communiques or statements issued when the conference adjourns should provide some hints.

Sihanouk's future is sure to be discussed at the conference. Party leaders consider the Prince an unscrupulous and adroit political operator and probably want their administrative apparatus firmly entrenched before they allow him to return. Sihanouk's continued absence, however, may be causing some unexpected problems. Comments by communist troops during the brief period when Western journalists were in Phnom Penh indicate that the Prince is not without a following within the country. [REDACTED]

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25X1

Even if domestic sentiment favoring Sihanouk's return is manageable, the leadership probably realizes that the longer he is kept cooling his heels abroad, the greater the possibility that the already apprehensive and humiliated Prince might of his own accord decide to end his association with the communists and go into permanent exile. Although this might suit some leaders, others probably recognize that the value of Sihanouk's foreign support—particularly that of China—argues for his early return. [REDACTED]

25X1

Next 3 Page(s) In Document Exempt

National Intelligence Bulletin

June 3, 1975

RHODESIA

Rhodesian police killed a number of blacks and wounded many more on Sunday as they quelled fighting among rival factions of the African National Council. The fighting was sparked by a meeting of the council's executive that was considering Prime Minister Smith's warning of last week that he would break off preliminary talks if the council refused to proceed with a constitutional conference.

Thousands of followers of the rival factions had gathered to demonstrate for or against holding a constitutional conference soon. Although none of the Rhodesian nationalist groups that merged into the council last December has formulated definite settlement terms, the Zimbabwe African National Union faction, which fielded the strongest guerrilla force in Rhodesia, wants to scrap the December truce agreement unless Smith agrees to lift the emergency regulations before a conference is convened. The hardliners also insist that Smith agree prior to a conference to an early transfer of power to the black majority.

The leaders of the Zimbabwe African People's Union, a smaller insurgent faction, have tended to make common cause with the council's more moderate faction, which has consistently advocated negotiating with Smith instead of fighting.

25X1



At the close of the meeting on Sunday, council leaders announced a decision to hold further "preliminary talks" with Smith to arrange for a conference that would be based on the premise of "immediate majority rule" and would include a representative of the British government—another condition that Smith has already rejected. Militant supporters may have heard of Sithole's orders and staged the demonstrations to show that the rank and file would not tolerate a constitutional conference on Smith's terms. The shootings may now be exploited by the black militants in Rhodesia and abroad who want to scuttle a negotiated settlement.

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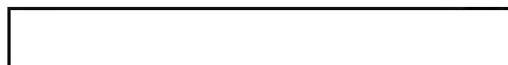
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